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Matter of Fact

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# We Underestimate the Russians

By Joseph and Stewart Alsop

EVERY SO OFTEN nowadays, anyone who still bothers to report the life-and-death facts of the American national situation gets a very peculiar feeling. It is the feeling of being suddenly transformed into one of those super-super bores who insist on reciting last night's bad dream at next morning's sunny breakfast table.

These reporters must confess to having this feeling at the moment. The last three reports in this space have been filled with an admittedly ugly and repellent mass of facts. Those facts were not printed because it is enjoyable to deal in what is repellent and ugly. They were printed because they unfortunately but all too conclusively prove a point of vital national importance.

The point is simple. The American air-atomic superiority which has served so long as the free world's sole defense is now rapidly melting away. The Soviet Union, by making vastly greater efforts than this country is now making, is beginning to surpass us in the one area of strength that used to be exclusively our own.

IT MIGHT be supposed that the merest suggestion that this could happen would stir things up a bit. The knowledge that it is happening, and the virtual certainty that nothing is going to be done about it, sometimes fills these reporters with an almost irresistible impulse to run around in circles barking like dogs. But in our present national condition of prosperous euphoria, most people are inclined to think that facts which prove anything unpleasant are really not facts after all.

So there is one further thing that needs to be said before this painful subject can be finally dropped: The facts are facts (one is almost inclined to shout it), or at least they are as near to facts as any information about the Soviet Union can ever be.

What then is the origin of these facts concerning Soviet output of advanced aircraft types, Soviet missile development and the like which we have been publishing? The answer is simple. They are squarely based on undoubted information concerning the "national estimates" which are, or at least ought to be, the basic building blocks of American policy-making.

A COMPLEX machinery to produce these national estimates has been set up under our highest policy-making body, the National Security Council. There is first of all an estimates board, composed of brilliant specialists from the Central Intelligence Agency, the armed services and the State Department and headed by the author of the most important

postwar book on strategic intelligence, Sherman Kent. The board has the task of making what may be called staff studies of special problems, such as the rate of Soviet aircraft output, for example.

But the process by no means ends there. The output of the estimates board, or any intelligence from other sources for that matter, cannot be accepted as official and therefore "national" until the problem has been examined by the National Intelligence Advisory Committee.

The committee is called advisory because the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Allen W. Dulles, has the exclusive statutory duty of providing intelligence to the National Security Council. Dulles serves as chairman of the committee, which in theory advises him. But the committee exists so that the final opinion offered to the Security Council by Allen Dulles may be fully agreed and approved by all interested parties.

HIGH-LEVEL representatives of the three armed services, the office of the Secretary of Defense, the State Department and the FBI sit on this committee. Unanimity of opinion is required. Any national estimate which emerges from the committee is a synthesis of the best opinion from all the different sources listed.

Experience has proved, however, that the national estimates can be safely relied on except in one important way. Perhaps because the unanimity requirement works in favor of the lowest common denominator, all national estimates of future Soviet military-industrial achievements have always turned out to be far too conservative when finally tested by events. It was true with the Soviet A-bomb and the Soviet H-bomb. It was true with the MIG-15 and the TU-4. It was true again with the "Badger" and "Bison" bombers and the "Farmer" and "Flashlight" fighters.

In every case where there has been a test to date, the official American intelligence forecast indicated that the Soviets could not do the job so soon, or that they could not do it on such a large scale, or that they could not do it really well. And in every case where there has been a test to date, the result has shown, alas, that Soviet capabilities had been sadly underestimated.

No allowance has been made for this built-in error in the facts and figures which have been printed in this space to show the massively growing air-atomic power of the Soviets. Most probably the true situation is measurably worse than we have represented it. In any case—to revert to our original image—it is the bad dream that is likely to turn out to be reality and the sunny breakfast table that will prove to be a dream.

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